

NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The messages you give, without saying a word!

BY CANDY TYMSON



Who do you think are the most successful job interviewees and why?

I was asked to be a member of an interview panel recently for three senior roles, and was stuck by the impact the interviewee's behaviour had on our final decision. (I confess, while I've been an expert in communication for many years, it is always good to be reminded of the impact of the basics!)

All of the candidates were impressive on paper — so how they performed in the interview obviously was significant.

Let me set the scene. The candidate sat at the head of the table with their potential boss on one side and two other panellists on the other. What struck me most was the level of energy (or lack of it) in each candidate.

One person in particular gave the persona of being exhausted. They regularly sighed loudly, slouched in their chair, and looked as if it would take a bomb to get them to move. They really were not sending positive vibes for a position that was described as "needing someone who was dynamic with outstanding communication skills". (Obviously they weren't offered the position!)

Non-verbal communication often screams out what a person is thinking — but may not be saying.

Listening to nonverbal and paralinguistic cues

What communication would you pick up from the following behaviours?

- Someone speaking quickly, darting their eyes around the room
- A person who continuously swings or taps their foot
- Someone who appeared so relaxed, that they even slouched in their chair
- A person continually referring to 'we' when asked to give examples of their work
- Someone who sits very still, with their hands firmly in their lap

Although it could be argued that most of these behaviours show that the person could have been feeling nervous — it could also be said that they came across as insecure, or hyperactive, or lacking in people skills, or disinterested as well.

In his book, *Psychology for Effective Managers* Robert Burns refers to Tannenbaum (1956) who found that the degree to which attitudes change positively is directly proportioned to the degree

of attractiveness of the communicator. The 'attractiveness' of a person was measured by rating them against the following six evaluation scales: fair/unfair; dirty/clean; tasty/distasteful; good/bad; pleasant/unpleasant; worthless/valuable.

So from this you should come to the conclusion that to be persuasive you should always try to be neat, clean and personable — the sort of person you would want to interact with. Power to persuade is greatly increased if credibility, trust and concern is linked with charm, humour and pleasantness. And in today's working environment, enthusiasm and flexibility would have to be added to the list.

To be a more persuasive communicator you should:

- Focus on what the other person wants to know, rather than what you think they should know.
- Keep the message simple and clear. Use examples to illustrate your point.
- Anticipate any objections, and cover them off, up front.
- Monitor the other person's response. Watch out for signs of confusion, irritability or impatience.
- Remember to involve them in the discussion. Talk with them, not at them.
- Be flexible and open to suggestions and ideas that may be different to yours.

What your clothes say

Another powerful nonverbal communication is projected in what you wear. Are clothes a reliable guide to what a person is really like? Obviously not, but I challenge you not to make a first impression based on how a person is dressed! As they say, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression.

So, what do you think of the ever-growing trend for business casual code of dress in offices, and what impact is it really having on business? I know many professionals whose lives have become more complicated because of it. Whereas previously, you always wore 'the suit', now you have to check your diary, see what meetings you have (if any) and decide what would be appropriate attire for those groups. In a drive to appear more modern and with-it, senior executives are adding to their stress levels. Have you been caught out yet wearing casual garb when you are required to attend a serious business meeting?

It's interesting to note that the trend in the US seems to be going back to more formal business dress and I reluctantly agree it seems to be more effective. There's no doubt about it, I am more business-like in my suit than I am in my jeans! And if I was interviewing for the position of a senior executive, I would still expect the applicant to arrive in a suit. With so many other non-verbal communication issues to deal with at least getting the dress right helps to create a good first impression.

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